Most problems faced by health care professionals have one or more ethical dimensions. In some cases there may be a relatively straightforward conflict between self-interest and some moral obligation. An example might be a situation in which you must decide whether or not to cancel a much anticipated personal engagement in order to help cover a shift that is short-staffed. Missing the theater is a matter of self-interest while patient safety involves a moral component of professional duty. This situation might be termed a moral problem. In other cases, the ethical dimensions are such that you are faced with an actual moral dilemma.

Beauchamp and Childress (2001) define a moral dilemma as a “circumstance in which moral obligations demand or appear to demand that a person adopt each of two (or more) alternative actions, yet the person cannot perform all the required alternatives” (p. 10). In such cases there are compelling arguments both for taking an action and not taking an action, or there are compelling arguments for taking two incompatible actions.

Experience and reflection play an important role in moral analysis and decision-making. However, when one is confronted with a moral problem or dilemma, particularly a situation that you have not previously faced, it is also helpful to apply a systematic approach to consideration of the problem. Even the most intuitive decisions benefit from a comprehensive and consistent process of decision-making. A decision model is a step-by-step framework for making decisions.

There are a variety of models for problem solving and decision-making (Johnson, 2001; Purtillo, 1999). The model presented here is based on an extension of the standard, problem-solving model that includes the basic steps of defining the problem, gathering information, generating options and selecting an action. This standard process is extended, by including additional steps specifically related to ethical analysis. The model contains the following 8 steps.

Step 1: Gather relevant information
Step 2: State the practical problem
Step 3: Identify the ethical issues and questions
Step 4: Select the ethical principles and/or frameworks to be considered
Step 5: Conduct an analysis and prepare a justification
Step 6: Consider one or more counterarguments
Step 7: Explore the options for action
Step 8: Select, complete and evaluate the action

This model is ideally suited to consideration of specific cases. However, the model can also be applied to general issues in professional and organizational ethics and bioethics.

Slide 4

Using the Decision Model

Step One: Gather relevant information

In this step you are identifying relevant information that consists of the factual elements of the case or topic. “Factual” information may also include assumptions about specific outcomes based on common experience or statistical likelihood. When considering a clinical case study, this factual information might include clinical indications such as diagnosis, prognosis, treatment options, and statistics related to complications or survival, and it may require additional research on your part. Patient preferences should also be identified, when possible, along with applicable information regarding current or future quality of life. When considering a case study regarding professional or organizational issues, preferences might also include those of caregivers and administrators along with other persons or entities that have a vested interest in the case (e.g., the community).

Finally, a number of external factors may also need to be identified. These factors may be directly presented in the case or may require additional research. The category of organizational factors might include established policies and procedures, organizational processes or structures, and prior decisions applicable to this case. Professional factors include the expectations and requirements of various professionals as outlined in codes of ethics and practice standards. In some cases, financial and other resource issues are relevant. There may also be legal requirements or precedents to consider. A final category would include social factors ranging from the family to cultural considerations and/or interests of the larger society.

When considering a broad topic, rather than an individual case, the relevant information falls into similar categories but is applied on a broader scale. For example, when considering an issue such as euthanasia, the category of patient preference may shift away from a statement of an individual’s preference and toward the expressed preferences of the larger society as identified in surveys, polls or legislative initiatives.

Not all information will be considered relevant in all ethical frameworks. For example, information regarding likely outcomes or consequences is not relevant in a Kantian analysis but it would be from a utilitarian perspective. Therefore, it is important to have initially identified a wide range of information pertaining to the case in order to enable you to view the case from multiple perspectives.
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Step Two: State the practical problem

This step involves stating the problem in terms of the decisions that must be made in order to take action. The focus of this statement is on what specific action should be taken rather than the reasons why or the justification for a course of action. Although this sounds easy to identify, it is not. For example, there may be more than one dilemmas involved in the case or there may be multiple decisions that need to be made over time.

It is important to try to avoid stating the problem in yes/no or all-or-nothing terms. Most issues will allow for a range of possible options. For example, treatment decisions are rarely as simple as treat or don’t treat, but rather call us to consider at what level to treat and for how long.

Slide 6

Step Three: Identify the ethical issues and questions

In this step, you are identifying the most significant ethical issue in the case or topic, and stating this issue in the form of one or more ethical questions. The goal here is to formulate the basis of your analysis and justification for taking or not taking a particular action. For example, asking a primary question regarding duty could take you in a very different direction in your analysis than asking a question of utility.

In this process, you are likely to identify a variety of ethical issues and questions. Once you have identified what you believe to be the one or two central ethical questions of the case or topic, you can also list secondary ethical issues and questions to be considered. These secondary questions can either provide support for your core arguments or they can provide the basis for your counterarguments in later steps.

Slide 7

Step Four: Select the ethical principles and/or frameworks to be considered

The ethical principles and/or ethical frameworks selected in this step become the basis for your ethical analysis or argument. An argument can be generally defined as a course of reasoning intended to prove the rightness or wrongness of a particular action or position. By extension, the counterargument is an alternate course of reasoning that challenges the logic, consistency and/or the basic assumptions of a particular argument. Well-formulated ethical questions directly suggest appropriate principles and perspectives. For example, a question involving duty might imply an argument from a Kantian or Rossian viewpoint along with one or more specific principles, while a question regarding the greater good might imply a utilitarian or communitarian argument. Your question(s) will also suggest a likely basis for your counterarguments.
You will want to identify a range of principles and perspectives that you feel are important to examination of the case. While your primary argument is built in response to your primary question, secondary questions may point to other principles and perspectives that can be considered in support of either primary arguments or counterarguments.

From a practical standpoint, this step becomes an outline of your analysis. If you have done a good job in the first four steps, the analysis will tend to write itself from this point. Not literally of course, since that would be too easy! 😊

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Step Five: Conduct an analysis and prepare a justification

Using your ethical question(s) as the basis, you can formulate and test possible answers using the principles and theoretical perspectives selected in Step 4. Focus first on your primary question(s) and then on any secondary questions that you feel further enhance your position. Your argument is essentially a statement explaining how a particular principle or theory can be applied, in this case or topic, to answer the ethical question posed.

Step Six: Consider one or more counterarguments

A counterargument is an analysis that directly challenges your initial argument. It’s a bit like arguing with yourself over which pair of running shoes to buy. In this step you are testing the analysis completed in Step 5 by arguing against your original position. Point out the weaknesses of your argument and consider the circumstances under which you might abandon or otherwise alter the position reached in Step 5.

Once you have argued as compelling as you can against your own points in Step 5, then you can feel more confident that your analysis is objective, unbiased and fair to multiple viewpoints. By considering the counterarguments, you will often arrive at more balanced and refined solutions that can better achieve common ground when there is disagreement or conflict among the involved parties.

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Step Seven: Explore the options for action

This step is deliberately placed near the end of the decision model. Our natural tendency as problem solvers is to jump to possible solutions early in the process. However, this early focus on practical solutions can artificially bias and limit both your ethical arguments and the options for action that you consider. Your goal here is to brainstorm a wide range of action steps and then test each action against the arguments presented in Steps 5 and 6.
Minimally, you should have at least three options to consider including the option of
taking no action. For example, in a dilemma of whether or not to treat, you would at least
consider the options of no treatment (or palliative care in some circumstances), ordinary
treatment and aggressive treatment. Clearly, the terms ordinary and aggressive are open
to interpretation and may take the form of several different intermediate options that
could be considered in a specific case. For instance, aggressive care might include every
possible intervention indicated by the patient’s condition or may stop short of full cardiac
resuscitation or long term support on a mechanical ventilator. Ordinary care might
include following all steps needed to stabilize a patient but may not include hydration and
nutrition after some specified point. Options may also include different time frames,
after which re-evaluation is needed.

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Step Eight: Select, complete and evaluate the action

This final step involves selecting and implementing one or more actions. However, the
model does not stop there. In order to complete the process, you must also reflect on the
situation and consider whether the action remains justified once it has been implemented.
Reflection might include the following questions:

- Did I identify and consider all relevant information?
- Did I correctly identify and frame the practical problem?
- Did I correctly identify and frame the primary ethical issue(s) and question(s)?
- Were there important ethical principles and perspectives I failed to consider?
- Were there viable options for action that I did not consider?
- Would I make the same decision again?
- How might I approach a similar situation in the future?

This completes the process outlined in the model. Failure to give adequate attention to
any one step of the model limits the quality and integrity of your final decision. Initially,
the model may appear lengthy and cumbersome. However, experience allows you to
become increasingly efficient in its use. By disciplining yourself to routinely consider
ethical questions and perspectives in your daily decision-making, you will eventually be
able to quickly construct sophisticated justifications that will become more refined and
consistent over time.

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